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ABSTRACT

There exists an overriding need to rethink our cognitive and perceptual approaches to the problem of inter-group living and the development of an ethnic person identity in terms of human behavior and development. Two conceptual models are needed: Socialization is a matter of learning about man-made structure; and individuation is a matter of understanding processes of human nature. What the individual must learn and will repress in order to live in his society is not identical with what he can learn or wishes to forget. We may speak of the individual way of perceiving and living with ethnicity; It is a way of behaving according to a special sense of "coming face-to-face and to terms with one's own." Then there is the group way within and for the sake of ethnicity. It is a pattern of living and working, of "presenting and performing among fellow man" with historical symbols, special legends, and conventional social pieties or actualities. The structural aspects of ethnicity ways can be understood in terms of readily identifiable processes of becoming a person and learning a distinctive ethnic style of learning. (Author/JM)

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THE QUESTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

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[Ed. Note: Presenting a psycho-cultural developmental approach to the understanding of individual and group ethnicity, this paper was the keynote of a symposium at the New York AAA meetings on Ethnicity and Education. It suggests a framework for viewing ethnic identity and presentation in relation to educational programs.]

Point of Departure

During the past decade a surfeit of compelling historical and economic reasons has prompted educators, policy makers, social scientists, and the press to re-examine the phenomenon of ethnic difference and conflict in American life. It is not my intention to review the fact and opinion about this complex phenomenon;[1] nor do I propose to comment on the many remedies proposed and already tried for the resolution of its problems.

On the other hand, there still exists an overriding need to rethink our cognitive and perceptual approaches to the problem of inter-group living and the development of an ethnic person identity. The need is apparent when we consider the fact that all major human experiments in living and social change are predicated on the existence of a shared or "public motivation" for a deeper understanding of the sources of individual and social being. It matters little whether the context of this motivation is a pre-industrial society or a poly-ethnic and highly diversified industrial nation.

A New Road to Understanding Individual and Group Ethnicity

There are two major approaches to an understanding and knowledge of the source and meaning of a personal sense of ethnic identity, and of its corollary, a group expression of ethnic identity. Even though each approach subsumes a different theoretical apparatus and requires its special methodologies, the informed mind must rely on both to arrive at a felicitous and incisive formulation of the nature and consequences of the phenomenon of ethnicity in individual and social action. Thus, we shall hereafter use this term to designate the individual experience and social reality of ethnic identity.

The two conceptual models needed for the reasoned elucidation of ethnicity can be briefly stated. Socialization is a matter of learning about man-made structure; individuation is a matter of understanding processes of human nature. What the individual must learn and will repress in order to live in his society is not identical with what he

can learn or wishes to forget. What the group believes to be basic, it often practices as a convenience. When it speaks of loyalty, it wishes perhaps subservience alone: and, where it is weakest, it may well find its strength to endure.

Thus, we may speak of the individual way of perceiving and living with ethnicity. It is a way of behaving according to a special sense of 'coming face-to-face and to terms with one's own.' Then there is the group way within and for the sake of ethnicity. It is a pattern of living and working, of 'presenting and performing among fellow man' with historical symbols, special legends and conventional social pieties or actualities.

For the individual, to have and to experience ethnicity involves one or all of the following processes of acquiring and 'using' a particular sense of 'selfhood':

(1) a searching introspection into one's past --one's name and lineage, one's ancestral village and general territory of origin.

(2) a critical appraisal of one's integrity as a person--one's personality.

(3) a comparative measuring of one's sense of worth and special quality as a social being.

(4) a cumulative judgement of one's sense of place and fellowship as a producer/consumer in a changing or unequal social order.

(5) an iterative statement of selfhood via a unique direct and spontaneous expression of emotion--hope, fear, love, joy, distress calls--as a signal to someone near or merely to oneself, as the occasion arises.

People vary in the intensity and breadth of coming face-to-face with their own. They also differ from one another in the manner in which they come to terms with it. Their experience may be a highly "secret" process of dawning personal awareness; that is to say, involving only a modicum of personal effort and emotional energy to secure and maintain the necessary cover and shelter from public knowledge and intrusion. On the other hand, it may be a more or less "open" process which allows little room, or no possibility of secrecy and privacy, no matter how persistent the search for respite from public curiosity and inspection.

Perhaps, this is where lies the crucial difference between what has come to be called the "black experience" and the "White ethnic way of being."[2] As Carl Rowan recently pointed out, it must have been "one of God's cruelest jokes" to allow man to link color with the nature of his inner self. For some, this is a highly condensed and simple understanding; for others, it is a protracted experience. From our point of view, however, it is sufficient to know that a person who had undergone this experience reflects in word and deed, the perennial categorical shadows of race, creed, and national origin.

For the group--its leaders and spokesmen, followers, "hangers-on," and "the quiet ones"--having and using ethnicity may be a matter of one or several ways of behaving:

(1) presenting and demonstrating for oneself, and "insiders," as well as to selectively targeted other people, or to outsiders in general with the visible signs and symbols, both traditional and fictive, of descent, creed, race, speech, and national origin.

(2) expressing openly a particular sense of being a social minority of one via recognizable speech patterns, or via an especially evocative, wordless folkery for those who have ears to hear and respond.

(3) testing and elaborating one's consciousness of kind for the purpose of controlling, influencing or posturing with a like-minded following inside a circumscribed social area.

(4) claiming for one's group an indefinable, unique aura of special sensitivity in order to classify other kinds of people into immutably lesser, or in any case, different social beings and forms of existence. It is easily reduced to the "THEM & US" syndrome of social perception and tirades, of retribalizing the social fabric, if you will.

(5) calling, naming, and blaming another person or group by picking on and labeling a thing or event as one sees it, yet claiming to "tell it as it is;" OR being a voluntary or unintended recipient or victim of this social labeling and leveling process.

(6) practicing ritual acts of alienation on particular out groups, by (a) making them, indeed, demoting them, into un-persons and non-people, by (b) perpetrating rhetorical harm on them, and by (c) predicting, if not actually committing, a final solution on designated strangers,

aliens, and minorities or all enemies of the people; or, being an unprovoked or intentional target of such assaults.

It is usually beyond the interest, internal discipline or capacity of a given human group, or any one of its members to become totally identified with all these modes of self-presentation and action, or to practice every mode on one particular outsider group. We do not have to be an historian, however, to know that man has visited such a calamity upon himself with uncomfortable frequency. This knowledge makes it imperative for us to recognize these ways of man as an ever-present and all too open field of options in the development of lasting negative mirror-images of self and other.

Developmental Summation of Passage into Personal Ethnicity

It is parsimonious to recast the details of individual and group ethnicity ways. Further reflection tells us that they are, in fact, personal styles of growing-up, thinking, feeling, and acting according to ethnic frames of mind, self, and "turf." This formulation reduces the basic variables and interrelations needed to explain the phenomenon of ethnicity. As such, it reflects also the essential scientific practice of fashioning special languages to state the conceptual basis as given interpretations of the nature of man or the nature of things. [3]

Restated, the structural aspects of ethnicity ways can be understood in terms of readily identifiable processes of becoming a person and learning a distinctive ethnic style of living. No one is, after all, granted or ascribed full membership in any human group by virtue of his birthright alone. On the contrary, every one must acquire useful as well as burdensome knowledge of self and other in the course of his passage into a changing company of equals and betters throughout the life cycle.

Human development cannot take place independently of a continuous figure-ground relationship between individual and group ways of behaving. Hence, becoming a particular kind of person and growing into ethnicity are always experienced as a coterminous process. For analytical purposes, however, we can distinguish seven interconnected dimensions of becoming a person and social being:

Ia. A GROWING UP of discovery and struggle with the 'familial inheritance' of worldly and characterological assets and liabilities, the inscrutable antecedents and influences affecting the course of life from the moment of birth, as well as, a

Ib. LEARNING TO LEARN of the essential separateness and variable connectedness between self and not-self.

IIa. GROWING INTO and learning to accept, or reject a special sense of personal origin, family history and locality, and

IIb. LEARNING ABOUT and discriminating between conventional codes of co-mingling among equals, and standing rules of interaction between unequals.

III. GROWING OLDER in searching and finding a rightful, or false direction and intensity of self expressing and life-work.

IVa. LIVING INTO and with personal conviction of having a just and deserved place in primary and secondary reference groups of his life-space; or

IVb. FALLING INTO an unequal position and perhaps undeserved status among peers and contemporaries.

Va. WORKING TOWARD a sense of the specific and FOR a lasting personal stake in the affairs of family, work and community;

Vb. WORKING TO FIT into a power niche, or moving about going no place in the existing social order of major and minor establishments.

VIa. WORKING ON a sense of individual time while PREPARING FOR social CHANGE in the course of taking active leave from selected fulfilled obligations, loyalties, and commitments for the benefit of peers and younger people within a gradually contracting circle of producers/consumers, or

VIb. RESISTING TIME OR CHANGE by holding in whatever activities there are, by grasping to the point of becoming alienated from one's talents and making strangers of one's fellow men.

VIIa. ATTAINING a sense of community in the process of BECOMING a respected elder in later life, and, perhaps a laudable ancestor thereafter by the timely turning over of secular reigns to the next generation for the future social order, or

VIIb. ACQUIRING a sense of isolation in the course of DECLINING into has been personhood and ENDURING as a déclassé person of fixed motives, only to end up in memoriam as a forgettable and perhaps blameworthy forebear.

Having said all this, it is next to impossible to convey all the subtleties of what it is and means to grow into selfhood and adult ethnicity.[4] That is the task of new research efforts which assess the persistent fact of inter-group conflict and ethnic co-existence in America in light of the current world-wide phenomenon of the retribalization of nationhood.[5] I propose that this work must begin with the conceptualization and understanding of individual growth into selfhood and passage into a lasting ethnic identity system as a special person-group transformation of the biological circumstance of procreation and of the cumulative process of learning customary ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling throughout the life cycle, from generation to generation.

In conclusion, I believe it is fair to state that most past and current studies of the place and function of persistent identity systems[6] in complex societies have too quickly moved to systematic inquiry on the basis of either the cultural, sociostructural, economic, political, or psychological models of man. That is to say, most investigators of this human phenomenon have been content with historically or cross-sectionally describing its existence, rather than examining the nature and root of its behavior components within a developmental framework of ordinary human social growth processes.

I am certain that if the social scientist intends to shed new light on this transcultural phenomenon of multiple ethnic identity systems and its relationship to the formation of individual motivational structure, he must rededicate himself to the arduous task of stating the problem in human behavior and development terms. My hope is that efforts of this kind could guide us toward surer ways of personally transcending the social inevitability of ethnicity. The answers we do find may be the only ones to bring us closer to this transcultural ideal: "What tomorrow needs is not masses of intellectuals, but masses of educated men, men educated to feel and to act as well as to think."[7]

FOOTNOTES:

[1]Glazer, N. "Blacks and Ethnic Groups: The Difference, and the Political Difference it makes," Social Problems, 1971, 18(4):444-461; Murray, A. The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture (New York: Random House, 1970): Ethnic Heritage Study Centers, Hearings, General Subcommittee on Education, House of Representatives, 91st Congress, Second Session, 1970 (U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C.); Silverman, C.E. Crisis in the Classroom (New York: Random House, 1970); Greeley, A. M. "Why Can't They Be Like Us?" Institute of Human Relations Press, Pamphlet Series 12 (New York: The American Jewish Committee, 1969):Lerner, M. "Respectable Bigotry," American Scholar (Autumn, 1969), 606-17; Schrag, P. "The Forgotten American," Harpers (August 1969), 27 ff. Beteille, A., ed. Social Inequality. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969): Callow, A. B., Jr., ed. American Urban History: An Interpretive Reader With Commentaries. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Rose, P. I. The Subject Is Race. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Fishman, J.A. Language Loyalty in the United States (The Hague: Mouton Co., 1966); Handlin, O. Race and Nationality in American Life. (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957); This Was America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949).

[2]James, W. L. "The Romance of the Negro Folk Cry in America." Phylon, 1955.

[3]Polanya, M. Personal Knowledge (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958): Science, Faith and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

[4]The intellectual and empirical antecedents of this discussion lie in the works of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Erik H. Erikson, and the many voices of reflection and anger, doubt and hope amongst black, white and other.

[5]An earlier, and theoretically less complete, version of this paper contains a preliminary statement of my view of coming into an 'American selfhood and ethnicity,' see Peachey, P. and Sister Rita Mudd, eds. Evolving Patterns of Ethnicity in American Life. (Washington, D. C.: The National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, 1971), pp. 30-47.

[6]Spicer, E. H. "Persistent Cultural Systems," Science, 1971, 174 (November 14): 795-800.

[7]Silverman, C. E. Crisis in the Classroom. (New York: Random House, 1970).